



Highlights: Dentists

Many people avoid a trip to the dentist like the plague, either because of the anxiety around the experience or the cost (or both). But finding a dentist who leaves patients smiling—and their smiles healthy—can make the experience much more pleasant. **Bay Area Consumers' Checkbook**, online at www.checkbook.org, rates local dentists for quality, identifies dentists who charge low prices based on the results of undercover price shopping, and has tips on how to keep costs down.

Checkbook surveyed 18,000 Bay Area consumers about their experiences with local dentists. Among the 337 general dentists listed in Checkbook's report, many were rated "superior" for "overall care and service quality" by more than 95 percent of their surveyed patients. In contrast, others got such favorable ratings from fewer than 70 percent of their surveyed patients.

If you don't carry dental insurance, you need to check prices. Checkbook's shoppers found big fee differences among dentists. For example:

- For a routine examination and cleaning for an established adult patient, prices among surveyed dentists ranged from \$82 to \$265.
- For bitewing X-rays (four films), prices ranged from \$40 to \$182.
- For a one-surface composite filling on an adult molar, prices ranged from \$100 to \$360.
- For a new porcelain crown for an adult molar, including post and core, fused to high noble metal, prices ranged from \$950 to \$2,500.

You don't have to forsake quality to use a dentist who charges low fees. Many dentists who receive high ratings for patient care also charge below-average fees. In addition to choosing a practice with low prices, other ways to save on dental care include:

- Practice good preventive care: Regular brushing, flossing, and professional cleanings will help you avoid future expenses for treatment and restorations.
- Inquire about alternative treatments for any condition.
- Get a second opinion before any costly procedure.
- Request written treatment plans and estimates in advance to avoid unpleasant surprises.
- If you switch dentists, have the new dentist obtain your records from the previous one. This may spare you the cost of some procedures, such as X-rays.
- Ask about specials and discounts. Some practices will offer specials on certain procedures. Others advertise low-priced packages for new patients. Some will offer discounts to special groups, such as senior citizens, students, fire or police professionals, and more.
- Check your health plan for dental benefits, especially for dependents younger than 19; the Affordable Care Act mandates pediatric dental coverage on individual and small-group medical plans. Some Medicare Advantage plans include dental coverage, and many "consumer-driven" and "high-deductible" health plans let you set aside funds for dental work.
- If you have dental insurance, or are considering it, understand the benefits and limitations. If you can get subsidized dental coverage through an employer, it's likely worth getting.
- Take advantage of a flexible spending account. Estimate your likely out-of-pocket medical and dental costs and stash that money in an FSA.
- Consider getting treated at a clinic operated by a dental school. The University of California San Francisco, Loma Linda University, and the University of the Pacific are local options.

Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.